

On the Brink

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Facilitated by Ellen Goldsmith



Drawing by Victor Goldsmith

For the 2027 Camden Conference

Beyond the American Century: A New World Order?

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On the Brink

*In this short Life that only lasts an hour
How much - how little - is within our power*

Emily Dickinson

Elizabeth Alexander	“Praise Song for the Day”	Susan Kellam
Jane Hirshfield	“The Weighing”	Debby Farre
Marie Howe	“What the Earth Seemed to Say, 2020”	Laura Buxbaum
Czeslaw Milosz	“A Song on the End of the World”	Nick Mills
Naomi Shihab Nye	“Elementary”	Meg Weston
Charles Rafferty	“The Problem with Early Warnings”	Susan Thomas
Percy Bysshe Shelley	“Ozymandias”	Carole Leporate
Martha Silano	“Nature Never Needs Recharging”	Paula Moreau
William Butler Yeats	“The Second Coming”	Bob Garcia
Adam Zagajewski	“Referendum”	Rabbi Lorin Troderman

Praise Song for the Day by Elizabeth Alexander
A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin.*

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or take no more*
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

The Weighing by Jane Hirshfield

The heart's reasons
seen clearly,
even the hardest
will carry
its whip-marks and sadness
and must be forgiven.

As the drought-starved
eland forgives
the drought-starved lion
who finally takes her,
enters willingly then
the life she cannot refuse,
and is lion, is fed,
and does not remember the other.

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

What the Earth Seemed to Say, 2020

Do you still believe in borders?
Birds soar over your maps and walls, and always have.
You might have watched how the smoke from your own fires
travelled on wind you couldn't see

waiting over the valley

and up and over the hills and over the next valley and the next hill

Did you not hear the animals howl and sing?
Or hear the silence of the animals no longer howling?
Now you know what it is to be afraid.

You think this is a dream? It is not
a dream. You think this is a theoretical question?

What do you love more than what you imagine is your singular life?
The water grows clearer. The swans settle and float there.

Are you willing to take your place in the forest again?
To become loam and bark, to be a leaf falling from a great height,
to be the worm who eats the leaf,
and the bird who eats the worm? Look at the sky—are you
willing to be the sky again?

You think this lesson is too hard for you.
You want the time-out to end. You want
to go to the movies as before, to sit and eat with your friends.

It can end now, but not in the way you imagine. You know the mind that has been talking to you for so long, the mind that can explain everything? Don't listen.

You were once a citizen of the country called: *I Don't Know*.
Remember the boat that brought you there? It was your body. Climb in.

A Song on the End of the World by Czeslaw Milosz

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.

Elementary by Naomi Shihab Nye

At the 100-year-old National Elk Refuge
near Jackson Hole, we might ask,
How long does an elk live?
Who's an old elk here?

We'd like to spend time
with an elder elk please.
Tell us how to balance our lives
on this hard edge of human mean,
mean temperatures, what we do and don't
want to mean.

Closing the door
to the news will only make you
stupid, snapped my friend
who wanted everyone to know as much
as she did. I'm hiding in old school books
with information we never used yet.
Before I drove, before I flew,
before the principal went to jail.
Sinking my eyes into tall wooden
window sashes, dreaming of light
arriving from far reaches,
our teacher as shepherds,
school a vessel of golden hope,
you could lift your daily lesson
in front of your eyes,
stare hard and think,
this will take me
somewhere. O histories of India,
geological formations of Australia,
ancient poetries of China, Japan,
someday we will be aligned in a place
of wisdom, together.

Red deer, *wapiti*, running elk rising
above yellow meadows at sundown.
An elk bows her head. In the company
of other elk, she feels at home.
And we are lost on the horizon now,
clumsy humanity,

deeper into the next century than we
can even believe,
and they will not speak to us.

The Problem with Early Warnings by Charles Rafferty

People don't like to leave a party
unless the house is actually
on fire. Even then, if the flames
are far enough away
to be pretty, they'll finish
their drink, take one more pass
at the hors d'oeuvres.

How things happen has always been
unclear. Hurricanes begin
in a place where no one lives.

Agents of the government start
to wear masks. *Fascism* is
a word my neighbors won't use
yet. They are following
the law, they say, and the sirens
are coming for someone else.

Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Nature Never Needs Recharging by Martha Silano

its network never goes down, including here
at Big Rock Elementary, where I tell my students
we're putting on our coats, going outside
in search of images. Past the manicured playground,
the bleachers, toward and beyond the fence
where Cody runs past me, yelling *slug eggs!*
I point to trees and flowers and birds, say their names:
Red alder. Licorice fern. Douglas fir. Together,
we listen to the *Oak-a-REE* of a red-winged blackbird,
the raspy call of an eagle soaring overhead.
Together, we touch the bark of a Hawthorne tree,
admire the fat buds of a big-leaf maple.
I tell each child to choose an artifact,
bring it to their desks. Back inside,
Carmen keeps asking, what's this called?
It's a blackberry leaf, I say. Smiling, she twirls it. Sniffs.
An ant hitched a ride on Simon's pinecone.
Tyler wants to know how to tell an osprey
from a hawk. Peyton asks if it's okay
he chose a dead leaf. The room is alive
with rocks and twigs. The poems they write
are crawling with spiders, wiry like lichen,
swaying with catkins, quiet like clumps of moss.
Nature has no username or password. Its signal
is always strong. All you need to do is stand
in a field, let your shoes get wet in the knee-deep grass.

The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Referendum by Adam Zagajewski

Ukraine held a referendum
on independence.
It was foggy in Paris, the weatherman
predicted a cold and cloudy day.
I was angry at myself, at my
narrow, fettered life.
The Seine was trapped between embankment walls.
Bookstores showcased
a new edition of Schopenhauer's
Douleurs du monde.
Parisians wandered through the city
hidden in warm loden coats.
Fog infiltrated lips and lungs
as if the air were sobbing,
going on about itself, about the cold dawn,
how long the night is,
and how ruthless stars can be.
I took a bus towards the Bastille,
razed two hundred years ago,
and tried to read poems
but didn't understand a thing.

What comes after will be invisible
and easy.
Whatever is hesitates between irony
and fear.
Whatever survives will be blue
as a guillotine's eye.

Brief Bios

Elizabeth Alexander (born 1962) is an American poet, writer, and literary scholar who has served as the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation since 2018. Previously, Alexander was a professor for 15 years at Yale University, where she taught poetry and chaired the African American studies department.

Jane Hirshfield (born 1953) is an American poet, essayist, and translator, known as "one of American poetry's central spokespersons for the biosphere" and recognized as "among the modern masters" who writes "some of the most important poetry in the world today."

Marie Howe (born 1950) is an American poet. Howe served as New York Poet Laureate from 2012–2016. She is currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and Poet-in-Residence at The Cathedral of St John the Divine.

Czesław Miłosz (1922 - 2004) was a Polish-American poet, prose writer, translator, and diplomat. Regarded as one of the great poets of the 20th century, he won the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Naomi Shihab Nye (born in 1952) is a Palestinian American poet, editor, songwriter, and novelist. Born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, she began composing her first poetry at the age of six. In total, she has published more than thirty-five books and contributed to hundreds of others.

Charles Rafferty (born 1965), an American poet, is the author of several books of poetry. Rafferty's work, Lydia Davis writes, is "sometimes lyrical and ecstatic, sometimes funny and self-deprecating, sometimes wistful, but always beautifully precise...."

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822) was an English writer who is considered one of the major English Romantic poets.

Martha Silano (1961-2025) was the author of eight poetry collections. Her awards included *North American Review*'s James Hearst Poetry Prize and *The Cincinnati Review*'s Robert and Adele Schiff Award.

William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939) was an Irish poet, dramatist, writer and literary critic who was one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature.

Adam Zagajewski (1945 – 2021) was a Polish poet, novelist, translator, and essayist. The titles of his poetry collections suggest some of his concerns: *Tremor*, *Mysticism for Beginners*, *Without End: New and Selected Poems* and *Asymmetry*.